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On December 19, 1998, Bill Clinton was impeached following his extramarital affair with a twenty-two-year-old White House intern. America's first family was coming apart, and it was happening right on the front page of the nation's newspapers. The public savored every juicy detail they could find about the political scandal that turned into a family melodrama in countless media retellings. The Clinton story was apparently not enough to satisfy public appetite for tales of families in ruin, as the years immediately surrounding the Monica Lewinsky scandal saw three films with this same theme: *The Ice Storm* in 1997, *American Beauty* in 1999, and *The Virgin Suicides* in 2000. The prevalence of narratives of white, suburban, upper-class families unravelling in the late 1990s cultural landscape indicates that Americans in this time period viewed this type of family as being under attack. This then begs the question: who was the attacker?

Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, in her essay "*Too Close for Comfort*": *American Beauty and the Incest Motif*, proposes one answer. She argues that second-wave feminism, defined by the movement of white, upper-class women out of the home and into the workforce, threatened the status quo of the white, upper-class American family. This is because America perceived the family as dependent on women to be passive, nurturing housewives and men to lead the family as heads of the household. When women neglected their domestic duties in order to challenge their husbands' authority as breadwinners, the power dynamics were thrown off and the family collapsed. According to Karlyn, career-oriented wives such as Carolyn in *American Beauty* and Hillary Rodham Clinton in real life were thought of as selfish, emotionless, and totally uninterested in sex. This made the family a poisonous place for their husbands, leaving them with no choice but to seek refuge in extramarital affairs.

Karlyn's analysis would have us believe that it is not the husbands' sexual infidelity that destroys the family, but rather, their ambitious and frigid wives' refusal to give their husbands sex in the first place. However, it seems strange to me that the 1990s American mindset would exculpate sexual promiscuity in the destruction of the family when the AIDS crisis had so recently shown just how destructive sex could be. According to film scholar Timothy Shary, the AIDS crisis fundamentally changed how sex (and teenaged sex in particular) was portrayed on screen. Whereas in the early 1980s, sex was portrayed as relatively inconsequential, films made in the post-AIDS era began to explore its destructive potential. The '90s saw unprecedented levels of depictions of sex as rape, as disease, as something that could quite literally kill you. Considering these cultural effects of the terrifying and pervasive AIDS crisis, I wondered if sexual promiscuity was seen as a cause of the family's destruction, not merely a symptom of families already destroyed as Karlyn would have us believe.

If we assume that sexual promiscuity is what destroyed the family in the public mindset, the most obvious guilty party, then, would be not the sexually frigid, career-oriented wives but their cheating husbands. However, if Americans truly believed these unfaithful husbands were to blame for destroying the family, Bill Clinton's approval ratings wouldn't have spiked 10 points following the Lewinsky scandal, and middle-aged Lester Burnham wouldn't have been the sympathetic, lionized hero of *American Beauty*. This leaves one culprit: the hypersexual girls and

young women these husbands had sex with, twenty-two-year-old Monica Lewinsky and 16-year-old Angela Hayes.

In order to understand the hypersexual adolescent daughter's role in destroying the white, suburban, upper-class, American family, I turn to the three films I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation: *American Beauty*, *The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides*. These three films have much more in common than simply all coming out in the late '90s. They are thematically similar in that they all tell the tale of a white, upper-class, suburban, American family unravelling, an unravelling that is marked by the death of at least one family member in each film. Additionally, these films are stylistically similar in that they all have muted colors and dim lighting, which gives a sense of the deadness that was thought to plague these suburban American families. Additionally, these films are also narratively similar in that they all feature aggressively hypersexual young women, a role played in real life by Monica Lewinsky. These three films establish a pattern to perceptions of family dynamics in the late 1990s and therefore serve to inform us whom Americans blamed for the downfall of the white, upper-class, suburban American family.



Figure 1: Angela and Lester in *American Beauty* (1999)

I begin with *American Beauty* because it is the film around which Karlyn's analysis centers, therefore providing the best opportunity to negotiate our competing arguments. In this film, 42-year-old Lester Bernham embarks on a midlife crisis that eventually leads to both his own death and the destruction of family. Though Lester is the perpetrator of the midlife crisis, the film doesn't hold him accountable for it, as he is still able to give the uplifting monologue that ends the film from a place of moral and intellectual superiority. If Lester isn't to blame, who is? Karlyn argues that Lester's career-obsessed wife, Carolyn, who refuses to sleep with him, drives him to his midlife crisis. While the film certainly portrays Lester's crisis as an attempt to distance himself from his selfish, unfeeling wife, the crisis itself only ensues after hypersexual, teenaged Angela mentions within Lester's earshot that she is attracted to him. This comment drives Lester to begin to work out and buy the cool car he wanted when he was a teenager. As we can see in the above still, Angela drives both Lester's midlife crisis and their ensuing sexual encounter. While Lester is passively stationary from his perch on the counter, Angela initiates the flirting by walking up to him and touching his bicep. Though Carolyn may have been an

added motive for Lester's family-destroying midlife crisis, the actual trigger is the hypersexual Angela.



Figure 2: Wendy and Mikey in *The Ice Storm* (1997)

The Ice Storm even more explicitly features a teenaged girl whose sexuality destroys a family. In the film, 13-year-old Wendy imposes her sexuality onto the two sons of the family next door, which ends up tearing their family apart. The above still features the scene in which 13-year-old Wendy coerces the hesitant older son, Mikey, into sex. Mikey is played by Elijah Wood, who even in adulthood has an innocent, cherub-looking face. On the other hand, Wendy's face is hidden by a Richard Nixon mask she finds in Mikey's basement. While Elijah Wood's face symbolizes purity and innocence, the Nixon mask symbolizes Wendy's insidious corruption. After Wendy's sexual transgressions steal Mikey's innocence, they bring about his death. When Mikey goes out looking for Wendy in an ice storm, Wendy forgoes meeting up with him in favor of seducing Mikey's little brother, Sandy. Wendy's prioritization of seducing Sandy over spending time with Mikey indirectly kills Mikey, as he gets electrocuted by a downed power line while looking for Wendy in the storm. When the camera zooms in on Mikey and Sandy's grieving father toward the end of the film, it becomes clear that Wendy's relentless sexuality has left their family in ruins.



Figure 3: Four of five Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* (2000)

As in *American Beauty* and *The Ice Storm*, *The Virgin Suicides* depicts a world wherein teenage female sexuality and the American family cannot coexist. The Lisbon girls subvert the family in the form of subverting their parents' authority, as the daughters flirt with and sexually tease nearly every male they come into contact with despite their parents' firm prohibition on dating. This conflict between female sexuality and the family comes to a head when the parents react to one daughter's loss of virginity by forbidding the girls from leaving the house under any circumstances. The girls, who are suffocating because they can't leave the family home, end up killing themselves as their only means of escape. In this narrative, the conflict between hypersexual teen girls and the family ends in the destruction of both, as the girls are now dead, their parents are now childless, and the suburban family home is now empty. This still shows the total incompatibility of teenaged female sexuality and the suburban American family. The girls long to explore the outside world, as demonstrated by Lux's stare outside the window, as well as their own sexuality, as demonstrated by Mary applying makeup to Bonnie's face. However, the suburban home, which symbolizes the family and parental authority, traps them and prevents them from doing so. The infantile bedroom, pale pink and full of stuffed animals, tries to keep them as sexless little girls, while these sisters long to grow into sexual adult women.

In conclusion, *American Beauty*, *The Ice Storm*, and *The Virgin Suicides*, as tales of families torn apart by adolescent female sexuality, serve to indicate key anxieties of their era. They reveal a culture fraught with worry over the perceived decline of the white, upper-class, suburban, American family; over destructive capabilities of sex; and over the newly-realized power of teenaged girls. In the next steps of my project, I hope to continue to use film to explore whether and how these anxieties have survived into modern day. Additionally, the demographics of the families in the genre of film I analyzed were identical, as all were white, upper-class, heteronormative, and suburban. Therefore, I also hope to understand how the anxieties over this one particular type of family compared to those of other kinds of families in the same era.

Thank you so much for your time.

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